

T+RT+TA+SA+LA = Effective English Teaching Team

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Abstract

This paper suggests ways that universities can organize effective English teaching teams with a teacher (T), Remedial Teacher (RT), Teaching Assistant (TA), Student Assistant (SA), and Learning Assistant (LA). Managed by the instructor in charge of the class or coordinated by administrative staff, the objective of the team is to instruct, motivate and improve student (S) engagement and learning.

Introduction

The English skill levels of next year's cohort of university entrance exam applicants to Japanese universities will likely be wider than previous years. This is because of the falling population in Japan. Therefore universities are trying to shore up declining enrollment numbers by allowing lower-scoring students to pass their entrance examinations, attracting students from overseas and increasing class sizes. Students (Ss) with marginal entry level qualifications can quickly fall through the cracks. Teachers will therefore have to seek new and more efficient ways to contend with mixed-level classes once this diverse range of students sit in class. A creative response to the issue for institutions that allow just about every applicant to enroll is to implement new ways to support underperforming students by bringing in remedial teachers, teaching assistants, student assistants, and learning assistants.

Borrowing Ideas from Health Care Team Management Models

To better understand how to organize assistant teachers in public and private academic institutions, it may be useful to borrow ideas developed in cooperation with health institutions. For example, English language educator Koch teamed up with Takashima, an OT (occupational therapist), to teach an EFL class to adult students with special needs in Sapporo (2016). The team claims that they formed an interdisciplinary team to observe and assess the teaching and learning that took place in their class. Although there are studies that combine occupational therapy and education, phonological development, and the teaching of languages to special-needs students, according to Koch, "we were unable to find anything involving team-teaching EFL with an OT and an ELT in the literature—this is a new concept." Occupational therapists are trained health-care professionals who practice the art and science of harmonizing a client's life and empowering them to achieve an acceptable level of sovereignty over a disability.

According to an earlier study by Takashima and Sacki (2013, p. 70), "the occupational therapist can carry the role of coordinator in an interdisciplinary team for the clients with disabilities by understanding them."

Keywords: Remedial Education, Teaching Assistant, Student Assistant, Classroom Management

Koch and Takashima (2016) had planned to have their lesson delivered by a teacher with the assistance of nine supporters (volunteer undergraduate students called SAs) who would monitor and help students when needed. The OT, in turn, was to be present as an observer—only the teacher and supporters would have an active role. Yet, this was not what happened. As their lesson flowed, they encountered situations that made them realize that the OT was a team member in the class, too. The case study was told from the T and OT's perspectives a shortcoming that they admitted (2016, p. 28), “unfortunately, there was no opportunity to talk with the volunteer undergraduate students who supported the students.”

Strategies to reduce the costs of education and more efficiently assign teaching staff today are similar to the strategies implemented to cut rising hospital budgets in the 1980s when medical professional salaries were deemed too high.

Before the days of Florence Nightingale, a surgeon would tend to patients. The Crimean War spurred the development of a hospital model based on nursing teams. That has developed hospitals run by administrators who contract with medical doctors (MD), hire registered nurses (RN), nurses (N), social workers (SW), occupational therapists (OT), childcare workers (CW) and other specialty and general staff. At the lower end of the pay scale continuum, health workers and assistants might be assigned cleaning and bed-making tasks to alleviate time constraints of higher paid staff.

Hospitals in Canada are run by governments or private corporations. University affiliated teaching hospitals are usually led by a head doctor, whereas a business leader more often serves as president of a private hospital corporation. At general hospitals operated and managed by the province, administrators schedule nursing shifts and assign other medical staff according to budgets. Creative private doctors' hospitals and teaching hospitals began forming medical teams to deliver care to patients or groups of patients. For example, an efficient 5 person team could comprise a MD, RN, N, SW and OT. The MD takes the lead in assigning goals and directing tasks. This is a management role that involves the task of planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling patient care. By creating a continuum of care givers from the doctor to the person who changes the bedpan, organizing their duties efficiently, forming medical teams, and adjusting the number of care givers per patient great efficiencies and satisfaction were achieved (McMurray, 1988). This hospital model reflects good practice and could be useful to guide current ideas on how to develop a more efficient university model. As an equation this is how the medical management team would read:

$$\text{MD} + \text{RN} + \text{N} + \text{SW} + \text{OT} = \text{Effective Medical Team.}$$

The University Teaching Team Model

In Japan enrolments are decreasing. In contrast enrolments in Canada keep increasing. Universities in both countries are funded by the tuition paid by students and operating grants from government. Private universities in Japan charge higher tuition fees because they receive limited grants. Nonetheless because university budgets in both countries are being squeezed, it means that class sizes are going up and fewer

$$T+RT+TA+SA+LA = \text{Effective English Teaching Team}$$

full-time professors are being hired. To solve these problems universities in both countries rely on hiring graduate students and part-time instructors. In Canada, graduate students teach many of the tutorials and labs, and do much of the marking for undergraduate courses at universities. In Japan TAs are not allowed to do marking and can assist in teaching as a team teacher but not instruct a full class.

Retired teachers and business professionals are sometimes recruited on a part-time contract basis as Remedial Teachers (RT). Teaching Assistants (TA) can also be hired to support the instructor-in-charge to teach a classroom. Another way is to hire Student Assistants (SA) who are senior university students to provide peer support. Learning Assistants (LA) who are often at the same age but offer to act as native language tutors sit alongside foreign language students. Currently the continuum of teaching faculty salaries can slide down from the highest paid professor to associate, assistant, lecturer, researcher and on down to the lowest paid position of LA. The SA makes approximately one tenth the hourly salary of a professor. It is not inconceivable for students in a large class to have access to a paid T, RT, TA, SA and LA. This article suggests that the task of planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling classroom environments is best handled by the instructor in charge of the class.

In Japanese junior and senior high schools, Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) and Team Teacher (TT) are employed. Depending on the success of the development of effective teaching teams at the tertiary level, is quite possible that high schools will begin to include SA and LA on the teaching team.

Professional support for students also includes guidance counsellors, librarians, nurses and psychologists, and other staff who provide health and social support services to students.

The theoretical equation is that, if managed properly, the English Teacher, Remedial Teacher, Teaching Assistant, Student Assistant and Language Assistants can make an effective language teaching team. As an equation this is how the university teaching team would read:

$$T+RT+TA+SA+LA = \text{Effective Teaching Team.}$$

Methodology

To study how to organize an effective teaching team of assistants, a study was conducted by observing classrooms where a SA, TA and RT were working. The students were given questionnaires. The SA, TA, and RT were interviewed. The findings were discussed with the T.

Participants

Three classrooms of students were observed. The sample size totaled 60 students (30 males), of which 35 were freshmen in intercultural studies. The other 25 students registered as English majors.

Survey

A questionnaire was administered in paper format. Short responses to open questions were solicited from

students. Comments made by students included the following: "SAs only help students with their lifestyle. SAs are close to my age." "SAs are university students." "SAs are friendly." "SAs help students to learn school rules." "TAs are graduate students. TAs know many things about the course." "TAs find study materials for students." "TAs support teachers and students." "Professors taught me technical knowledge of language." "Professors do not have language teacher licenses." "Professors are experts in a particular field of study."

Interviews

To supplement and clarify the responses obtained in the survey SAs were interviewed (3 of 40 participants) during the study. The attitude and understanding of the role of work they performed was explained as follows: "I am an SA for first grade university students. I am happy to be an SA. SAs give advice to help students succeed and not drop out of school. TAs prepare equipment for the classroom. I am paid for 120 minutes per class." "I am a SA for a PC class. I directly teach students to use basic computer software such as Power Point, Excel, and Word. I am paid for 90 minutes per class. I am an SA for a physical education class. I support the teacher."

During interviews with students who worked as TAs, it was reported that they sometimes experienced classroom management problems and wished they had more time to discuss the lesson plan with the professor. TAs noted that "it takes time for some students to realize that their English is in fact good enough to be understood and to believe in themselves from the bottom of their hearts." Active learning entails creating a dynamic environment for students to move to where learning can best take place. For example, one lesson could include teams using chairs and desks in various ways, and writing ideas on white boards placed on all 4 walls of the classroom or using electronic whiteboards (see figure 1). Kawamura (2016, p. 32) claims that "typically TAs set up the electronic equipment and move desks, chairs and whiteboards for a particular language teaching activity," but also "summarize and create supporting teaching materials to help the students to understand the lesson at hand." Realizing that TAs should not deviate from the way the class is conducted by the teacher, the TA explained that sometimes "it seems important to me to speak in Japanese or to build the confidence of some students."

During an interview with an extracurricular language instructor (RT) it was revealed that "Some students seem eager to speak in my classes because they had traveled abroad. I encourage them to speak up when they attend regular classes. Some students seem reluctant to even move a pencil, though. I quickly found that students do not normally want to participate in pair work exercises. Only if they are seated beside friends can they be encouraged to speak to one another."

Observations

A large class with one T, supplemented by a TA is not only a pedagogic strategy, but also a financial and administrative strategy used in Canadian and Japanese universities. In Japan, adding a SA, TA, or RT to the pedagogic mix is currently under study at private universities in Japan. Large class size is a relative

concept. In China a large foreign language learning class is more than 100 students. Large is whether the teacher perceives the class size, and one with more students than the teacher prefers to manage and available resources can support. Ur (2000) claims that large classes can provide richer more diverse human resources and greater opportunities for creativity than smaller classes are able to do. More students can mean more ideas and more opinions. It may be the teaching methodology rather than class size that contributes to the efficacy of teaching. Teaching strategies to cope with the problems are called for.

Student-to-teacher ratio refers to the maximum number of students a teacher is required to handle within a class. Some classes with very large class size actually have a smaller student-to-teacher ratio than small classes because TAs are assigned to small groups of students. These assistants, who are often graduate students or part-time professors, mentor their small group and are the first line of defense when students have a question or a problem.

Locastro (2001) lists the problems of teaching large classes as pedagogical, management-related and affective. Use of multimedia has been proposed to solve many pedagogical and management-related problems however this study suggests the use of classroom assistants.

Roles of Classroom Assistants

Most undergraduates study in college-level courses that are integral to their academic pathway. Large class sizes at the freshmen level can frustrate some students. When they face challenges in mastering a gateway college-level courses, they can seek academic support from an LA, SA, TA, RT, or the T during office hours.

Learning Assistants (LA)

Students respond to students. Hiring students as peers, tutors and helpers for language learners can instill enthusiasm, energy and sociability on the university campus. University students make great employees in these capacities. The hiring of native speaking students and pairing them with international students to chat improves the campus environment.

Student Assistants (SA)

SAs help the person in charge of a classroom, but their primary goal is to help freshmen students feel comfortable studying at the university level. Students respond to older students and often follow their advice, which is called the *sempai* effect in Japan. SAs seem to be effective in freshmen seminar classes and in large classes or groups that do fieldwork outside the classroom. SAs could also be useful in language classes. Hiring students who are one or two years older can make for more communication links between students of different ages. SAs can be hired from the ranks of university juniors and sophomores. As well as aiming at helping a lesson to be better for freshmen students, the SAs can develop communication and coaching skills. In addition to receiving guidance from the instructor in charge, regular training seminars can help develop their abilities to be assistants. After learning the basic rules of education assistance and discussing the basics of communication skills students can deepen their understanding about the role and

responsibilities of the SA. Holding SA workshops 6 times each semester with a concluding conference can round out opportunities for professional development.

Teaching Assistants (TA)

Teachers' aides and TAs include non-professional personnel or graduate students who support teachers in providing instruction to students. In Japan the role of the TA is usually decided by the professor, the teacher (T) in charge of the class. Teaching staff refers to professional personnel directly involved in teaching students. The T usually selects who will fill the position, often a seminar student or researcher who majors in the topic to be instructed. To be successful the T and TA need to create a real teaching partnership.

While teaching assistants are vital sources of support for teachers, knowing how to manage them can be tricky. For many graduate teaching assistants, the task of planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling classroom environments can be overwhelming. There are three main types of teaching assistant: the discipliner; the negotiator; the counsellor. Empirical research (Luo, Bellows & Grady, 2000) pertaining to major classroom management problems experienced by the TA suggests that the number of years of learning experience is a significant predictor of classroom problems and concerns. Management related problems include keeping the class disciplined by moving around the class and establishing routines. Grouping of students can be made.

According to Kawamura (2016) TAs can have beneficial but also negative effects on student motivation in college-level courses. Pedagogical concerns of large classes can be met by establishing student-centered approaches. With the help of a TA, the T can provide opportunities for pair work and group work. The TA can guide activity based language learning group activities. Having a TA in the class can promote learner autonomy.

Extracurricular Language Instructors (RT)

The building of confidence and trust is important to elicit communication between students in a remedial education program. Students receive remedial instruction from instructors or graduate students, who are not main stream teachers. The lessons are given as a kind of scaffold or sheltered learning environment while enrolled in a regular gateway college-level course (see figure 2).

The ultimate goal of extracurricular teaching is to keep students attending classes in a regular class environment rather than have them drop out. If university students find that they have not been sufficiently prepared during their high school years to succeed in gateway courses, RTs can help them in a sheltered-learning class environment outside the mainstream curriculum. Remedial education can save students who are underprepared for college-level classes but nonetheless don't want to drop-out. Remedial subjects are usually taught by retired teachers, part-time teachers and graduate students.

The RT lowers the standards set for normal classes to help students learn at a slow comfortable pace. Students receive this easier remedial instruction as a kind of scaffold or sheltered learning environment while enrolled in regular university courses. The building of confidence and trust is important to solicit communication between students in the remedial education program. Iwazume (2016, p. 29) claims that

as an RT, “I am not pushing students to study faster and faster, I am trying to pull them along gently in tandem with their mainstream professors.” No final examination is given in her remedial class, nor are students asked to take TOEIC or other measures that assess student skills. At the university where she studies English Education at the graduate level, a remedial education program was constructed for freshmen students as a single semester pathway into Mathematics, English and Japanese language courses. These three subjects were identified by career development administrators as essential skills required in most careers in Japan. Iwazume (2016) found that the low-achieving students in her class tended to confide their concerns to her first rather than to classmates or teachers in the faster moving “gateway courses” of the regular curriculum. Iwazume (2016) tried “to lower the hurdle created in normal classes and help get students over the bar easily and comfortably. There are diverse levels of language skills in my classroom, but it was decided to not assess students by testing them. No final examination is given in the remedial class, nor are students asked to take TOEIC or other measures that assess student skills.”

Working as an RT is a win-win situation for education majors who want to improve their chances at passing Ministry of Education qualification exams set for Junior High School English teachers. Teaching sheltered-learning classes allows student teachers-in-training to practice teaching and learn firsthand the problems of students who have troubles learning in a regular environment.

It is possible that low-achieving students might confide their concerns to the RT first, rather than to classmates or teachers in the faster moving courses of the regular curriculum.

The Teacher (T)

The professor holds the traditional place of authority at the head of the class with the responsibility to set syllabus, select textbook, assign exams and determine grades. The instructor in charge of the university class is better positioned than administrators to manage the tasks of the assistants to make the classroom team function efficiently. It is recommended that the selection of the SA and TA be made by the instructor in charge of the lesson with final decision made by the administration.

The T needs to realize that assistants can likely perform their assigned jobs as RT, TA, SA, LA more efficiently than the T can. Students do listen to their peers and do learn and take advice from other students. The T can best manage a class by delegating teaching responsibilities to the assistants. For example, have the TA keep an eye on attendance and ask the TA to arrange the seats, tables and classroom multi-media equipment to suit various active learning environments (see figure 3). The TA can help to identify which students are struggling and which are ahead of the class. The teacher can show concern for both strong and weaker students. The teacher can ask SAs to carry out a social function with peers whose attendance is erratic. Affective problems can be addressed by knowing the students. LAs can tutor foreign students by sitting beside them in class or chatting before after class. SAs could suggest students seek extra lessons from remedial teachers. These efforts can reduce drop out and achieve the original productivity goals desired by the university administration.

Conclusion

This study on how to effectively and more efficiently manage classrooms in Japan included observations on medical teams. In a study by Koch and Takashima (2016) it was found that SAs need in-the-classroom training. Some crucial moments in their lesson required more than the presence of one teacher and an SA. For example in their class some students were unable to cope. The teacher and SA's instinctive response was to come to their aid—unbeknown to them, they were generating even more stimuli. The OT noticed this and went on to instruct the SAs rather than the students or the teacher. These short interventions were useful to train supporters to help students, and this reduced the amount of stimuli students received (e.g., through tidier desks, and fewer hands and faces around to distract attention). This approach not only allowed the supporters to understand their roles and help students more effectively, but also freed the teacher and OT to focus on their respective roles. Because of teamwork, the educator and the OT and the SAs started to transform their class into something less class-like. The language development goals of each activity became secondary and we used our resources to ensure the students were primarily having a positive experience with English.

It would have been possible to achieve the lesson aims with a traditional setup—in this case, one teacher and some supporters. However, by working together, they found opportunities for improvement that would have otherwise been missed. Some issues that emerged in class wouldn't have been addressed properly without this collaboration.

The study also considered the deployment of TAs in Canada where large classes and fewer instructors seemed to be the central issue. Class sizes are going up, the student-to-full-time-faculty ratio is going up, and there is greater reliance on university juniors, graduate students and part-time instructors to help teach. Academic policy discussions are dominated by the need for budget cuts.

One way to pave over the cracks that underperforming students slip through at Japanese universities is to offer remedial education to students identified as likely to drop out because of difficulties keeping up with peers in larger classes. Currently universities in Japan are also measuring the effects of hiring SAs as a preventive measure for students who are considering whether to drop out or stay committed to studying in class.

Hiring SAs and TAs and organizing an effective team of assistants is a first step. A second step is to hire RTs who can provide remedial education to students identified as likely to drop out because of difficulties keeping up with peers in larger classes. Offering extra assistance in English can also prove popular with parents who ask for support in guiding their offspring towards a more promising career.

To be effective means the goals are achieved, but to be efficient means the goals are achieved at the budgeted cost. The tasks of planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling classroom environments can be overwhelming, but with careful implementation of a team of assistants classroom management can be achieved. Managing the tasks of the classroom assistants to make the team efficient achieves the original productivity goals desired by the university administration and seems to improve student engagement and

learning.

The ultimate goal is to keep students attending classes in a regular class environment rather than scare them away. Future research could evaluate whether the T+RT+TA+SA+LA classroom management method results in decreasing problems such as school refusal.



[figure 1. Active learning requires arranging chairs]



[figure 2. RT and TA extracurricular classroom]



[figure 3. TAs traditionally operate classroom equipment]

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